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## ABSTRACT

Pennsylvania high school seniors who were tested on their knowledge of South Asian geography, history, political science, and culture knew little about this politically important region. The sample included 684 urban and rural students from high and low income families who answered 43 multiple choice questions on knowledge, interests, and attitudes about South Asia. Some of the weak areas included confusion about American relationships with Pakistan and India; incorrectly identifying India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh on maps; not recognizing India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as former British colonies; and demonstrating uncertainty about religious and ethnic divisions within the area. Student attitudes toward South Asia were neutral to negative, but their attitudes toward South Asians personally were receptive. They were also somewhat interested in learning more about the culture of the region. Appendices include information about participating high schools and the breakdown for answers to 12 of the 43 questions used on the multiple choice test. (IS)

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SOUTH ASIA in the MINDS of PENNSYLVANIA  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Education (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 1984).

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The United States is rapidly entering an era of international involvement where understanding and mutual cooperation are replacing the role of unquestioned unilateral authority. Such a transition in a democratic society places increasing demands upon the nation's educational system and the social science component in particular.

To meet this challenge a number of states, Pennsylvania included, have begun to emphasize the concept of global education in the total public school curriculum. While this new concept has not been fully implemented, and the ultimate results remain speculative, there is increasing evidence that the nation's high school and college students are seriously lacking in knowledge about the world beyond our borders. Even more disturbing is the apparent lack of interest in international affairs. This situation has been recently documented by an extensive study completed by the Educational Testing Service for the Council on Learning and summarized in the publication What College Students Know and Believe About Their World.

As American interests in South Asia have been sharpened by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan,

strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, and increasing trade contacts, the need for enlightened citizenship is evident.

Based upon this concern, a survey instrument was developed in an attempt to access the knowledge, interests, and attitudes of high school seniors in the state of Pennsylvania. This work was supported by a grant from the Shippensburg University Foundation Program of Grants for Faculty Research.

### Procedure

The survey instrument was developed containing forty-three (43) multiple choice questions designed to sample the knowledge, interests, and attitudes of high school students in reference to South Asia. This instrument was evaluated by Dr. John E. Benhart, chairman, Geography-Earth Science Department at Shippensburg University; Dr. Mahandas K. Boliga, department of Political Science, Shippensburg University; and John Stumbaugh, department of History/Philosophy and instructor of social studies teaching methods at Shippensburg University.

Upon initial editing the instrument was pilot tested in the senior class of Shippensburg Area Senior High School where, upon the recommendations of social studies department chaired by Mr. Coy, further modifications were made.

Statistical data provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education provided a basis for the selection of sample school districts in the state representing high/low income areas and urban/rural population densities. (See Appendix). These districts were contacted with a request for cooperation in this project. While most schools agreed to

cooperate, a few, due to schedule difficulties or administrative policy, were unable to offer assistance. This, however, did not effect the desired distribution of samples and the survey instrument was forwarded to the cooperating teachers for administration in their classrooms.

Upon receipt of all returned results<sup>(684)</sup> the Op-Scan test sheets were processed through a computer analysis based upon Shippensburg University's Special Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The results of this analysis are presented with brief commentary in the following sections of this paper. For the sake of clarity only significant statistics are presented here, with full statistical tables reserved for the appendix.

### Student Knowledge

Several broad areas of general knowledge were sampled based upon information that high school students could reasonably be expected to know.

The first segment consisted of five questions strictly related to the identification of countries from a provided map. The results indicated that 43.6% could accurately identify Bangladesh, 85.7% India, 42.4% Pakistan, 55.2% Afghanistan, and 50.7% Sri Lanka. The high recognition level of India was to be reflected in later portions of the survey both in attitudes and interests. Afghanistan's recognition level may have been influenced by recent news media and classroom discussions concerning the current Soviet presence there while the physical uniqueness of Sri Lanka may account for its ease of identification. Bangladesh (43.6%) and Pakistan (26.9%) were confused (q. 1), perhaps as a failure to understand the results of the 1972 war or classroom maps pre-dating 1972 and still indicating East Pakistan. Notice, however, Pakistan was confused with Iran (q. 3, 26.7%), perhaps due to its location.

The next set of questions could be broadly classed as history and political science. In a question concerning which country had the closest military contacts with the United States (q. 6) 32.6% said they did not know, 20.5% picked India while 19.8% indicated Afghanistan. Only 21.2% selected Pakistan. Given the present policy of United States military aid to Pakistan, India's objection to this aid, and Afghanistan's occupation by Soviet troops, there would seem to be significant confusion concerning the role of the United States in this area.

The historical evolution of South Asia is not fully understood as indicated that only 19.7% could identify India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as formerly part of the British colony (q. 7) 21.6% indicated that they just did not know.

Gandhi was recognized by 80.3% of the students as a national leader of India (q. 8), but only 25.0% identified India as having the longest standing civilian democratic government in the region (q. 9) while 34.5% did not know. Again the students did not recognize the newest independent nation of South Asia (35.2%) while only 27.9% selected

Bangladesh (q. 10).

In several questions of a more clearly geographic nature 27.1% were able to identify Dakka as the capitol of Bangladesh while 20.5% picked New Delhi and 29.0% did not know (q. 11). The Ganges was overwhelmingly identified as the major river of India (q. 12, 41.7%) while 28.1% could recognize a physical description of the Kashmir region with 22.8% indicating that they did not know (q. 13). Interestingly, 19.1% opted for a "low lying, hot, dry" description of this region, perhaps an over generalization of conditions elsewhere in South Asia. A similar generalization may account for the identification of rice as the major crop of the northwest Ganges plains region (Punjab) by 39.0% while 26.4% accurately indicated wheat (q. 14). The movement of the monsoons and the extent of their penetration seems to be rather well understood as 38.3% indicated Afghanistan as being least influenced (q. 15). Disturbingly, 21.0% felt that Sri Lanka was least influenced although this error could have resulted from question design with Sri Lanka appearing in the normal place of "I do not know" as a choice.

The last six questions in this section dealt with language and religion. Here 48.6% were able to identify Mohammed as the Prophet of Islam (q. 16), while 69.3% correctly recognized that, being predominantly Hindu, meat would be rarely eaten in India. 61.9% were able to associate the cast system with India (q. 18), but were unable to clearly select Buddhism as the religion originating in India but declining in importance in subsequent years (q. 22). Some confusion seems to exist over South Asian languages. When asked to identify the most commonly spoken language throughout Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka only 12.1% selected English while 60.7% chose Hindi (q.19). Departing from the survey for a moment, should note that my freshmen college students seem to confuse Hindi, the language, with Hindu, the religion. Perhaps this could explain a reasoned choice of Hindi under the circumstances. Understanding of the role played national languages appears to be limited as 26.2% said they did not know of another country with the same official national language as India and only 14.1% correctly indicated that the language was not shared.

### Regional Attitudes

In terms of attitudes toward the individual nations of South Asian the students viewed India most favorable (q. 23, 33.6%) while giving Pakistan the least favored evaluation (q.24, 33.3%). This is particularly interesting in view of the substantial United States military/economic aid program for Pakistan and our long standing friendly relations with that country while India's nonaligned status has frequently placed a strain on our relationship with her. (44.4% did not care for any of the South Asian countries). A possible explanation could be India's higher visability and familiarity resulting from history text books to Air India tourist advertisements in popular magazines. When it comes to the issue of United States economic aid the students are more even in their judgments, indicating that aid should not be given to any of the three countries listed (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), although there was once again a slight bias toward India with Pakistan the least acceptable (q. 25, 51.6-3.4%).

When asked where they would first like to travel out of five major world regions, Europe emerged a resounding winner (q. 27, 71.3%) with East Asia a very poor second. South Asia trailed

in last, behind Africa, with only 2.8% interest. Apparently the romance of the Taj Mahal is not very strong in their minds! The choice of Europe could indicate a degree of familiarity and perceived identification with the ancestral homelands.

Personal Attitudes

A very acceptive attitude was expressed by the students in their personal feelings toward South Asians. Neither religious differences (q. 30) nor skin color (q. 32) were considered important in the establishment of friendships, and there was a strong belief that their peer group would be quite receptive to a South Asian student (q. 31). This receptiveness was tempered somewhat by uncertainty due to lack of previous contact with South Asians (q. 28). This is reflected in the slight reservation toward acceptance of a South Asian family as neighbors (q.28).

### Student Interests

The students shared the belief that their knowledge about South Asia as a region was below that of other world areas (q. 33, 44%) and would like to know "a little bit more" about the region (q. 34, 44.4%). When asked which of the South Asian countries they would like to know more about the responses were rather evenly distributed with India (26.3%) and Sri Lanka (20.2%) showing up after a rejection of any countries of the region by 29.4% (q. 35). Interestingly, India was indicated as the country that they "knew enough about" (q. 36, 48.2%).

In response to questions asking what they would be most interested in learning about, South Asia (q. 37-38) 45.8% indicated "the way of life", followed by a rather even distribution of interest in art, religion, language, literature, geography, and history.

### Student Information Sources

The students indicated that they gained the greatest amount of information about South Asia from high school courses (q. 39, 56.6%) while newspapers/magazines, and television/movies were noted as the second major source of information (q. 40, 31.6%-32.5%). Books, parents and friends provided little information. When asked if they had viewed the film Gandhi, however, only 11.4% indicated in the affirmative (q. 43).

### Acknowledgements

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Central High School  
300 East 7th Ave.  
York, PA 17404

William H. Karalowety, Jr.

East Forest High School  
Marienville, PA 16239

Arthur Van Nort

Marple Newtown Senior High School  
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William Capriotti

McDowell High School  
West 38th St.  
Erie, PA 16506

Arthur Bergamosco

Oswoyo Valley High School  
Shinglehouse, PA 16748

Russel Shields

Shippensburg Area Jr.-Sr. High School  
Shippensburg, PA 17257

Samuel Norris

West Branch High School  
Box 248  
Morrisdale, PA 16858

Ralph F. Ventresco

General knowledge of South Asia weak and in need of improvement.

Student attitudes toward South Asia are neutral to negative.

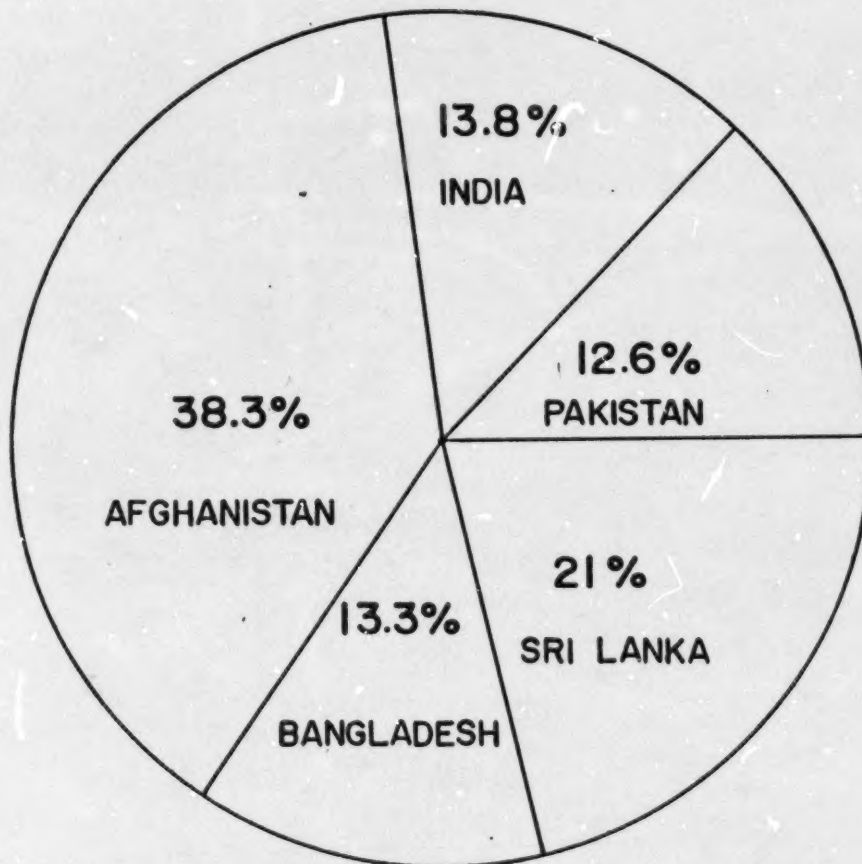
Student attitudes toward South Asians personally are receptive.

Students are interested in learning more about the "way of life" of South Asians.

#### Suggestions

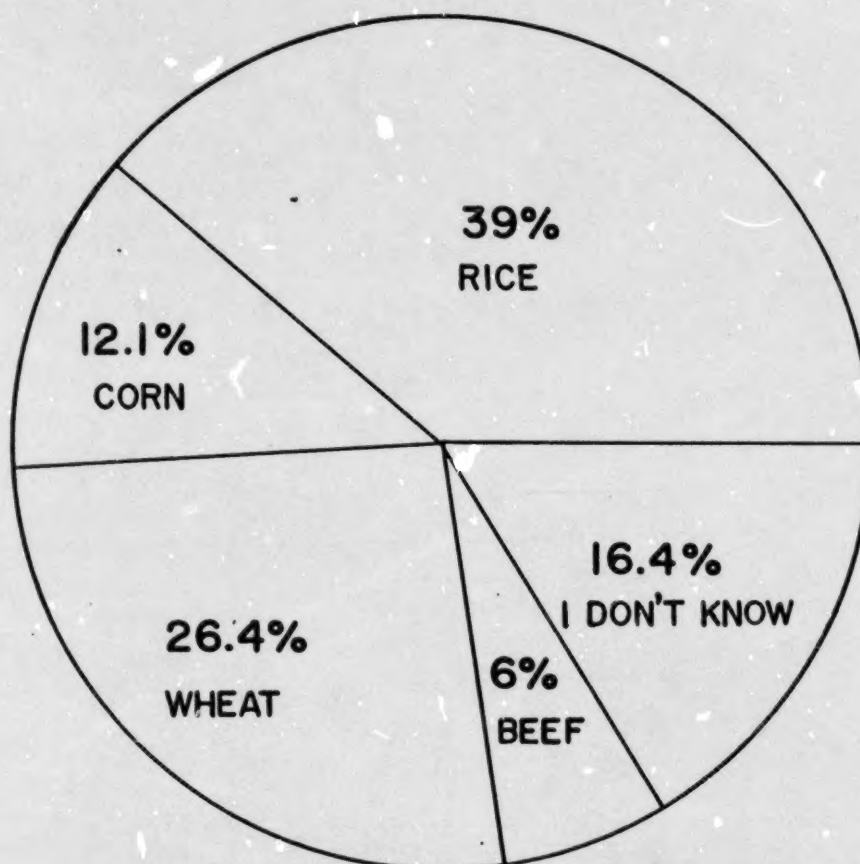
1. Increase attention to all South Asian nations.
2. Focus on recent history and the use of current events to stimulate interest.
3. Expand anthropological coverage as a tie-in with more academic "facts".
4. Update library holding on South Asia and explore the possibility of filmstrips and other educational material.

## KNOWLEDGE



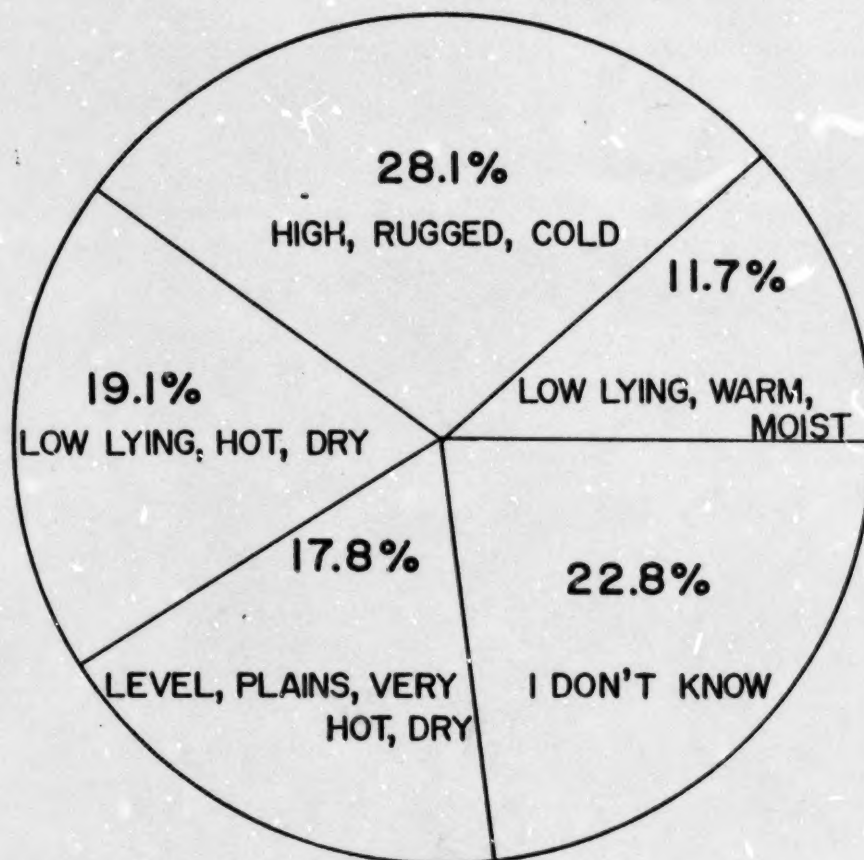
THE COUNTRY LEAST INFLUENCED  
BY THE MONSOONS WOULD BE:

## KNOWLEDGE



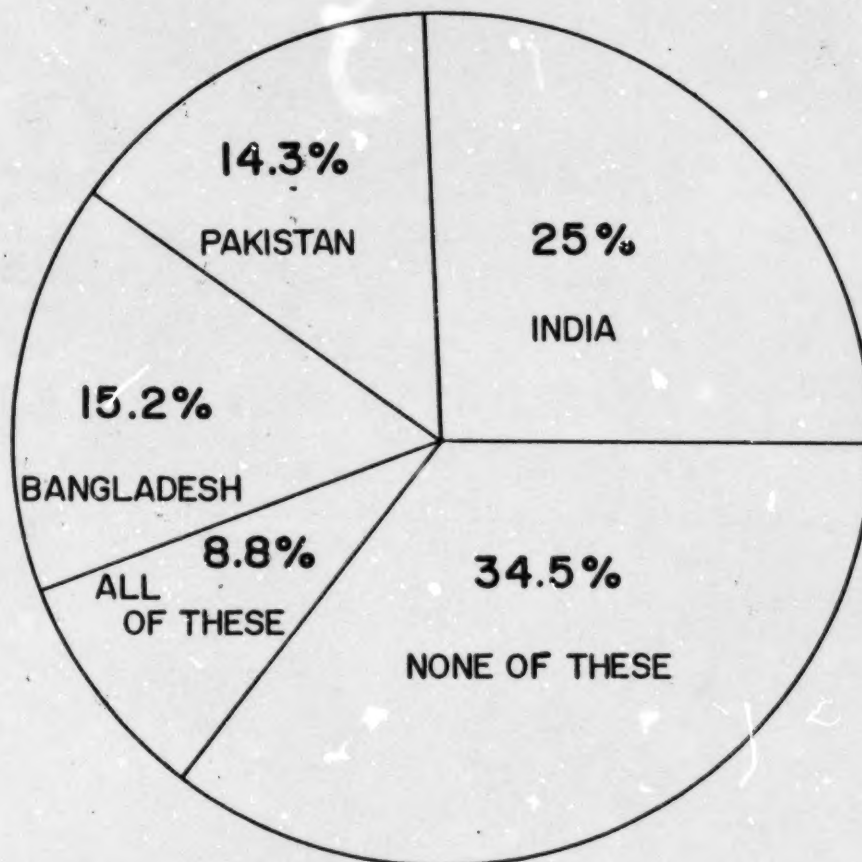
THE MAJOR AGRICULTURAL FOOD PRODUCT  
OF AREA B IN COUNTRY #2 IS (PUNJAB):

## KNOWLEDGE



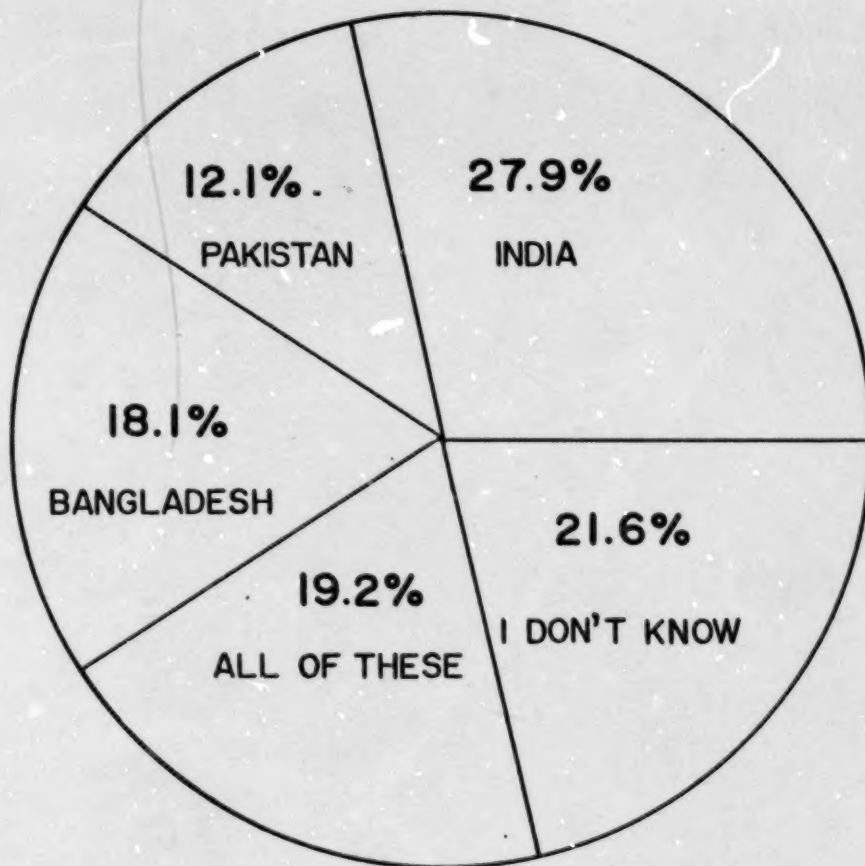
THE PHYSICAL CONDITION OF AREA A IN COUNTRY #3  
COULD BE BEST DESCRIBED AS (KASHMIR):

## KNOWLEDGE



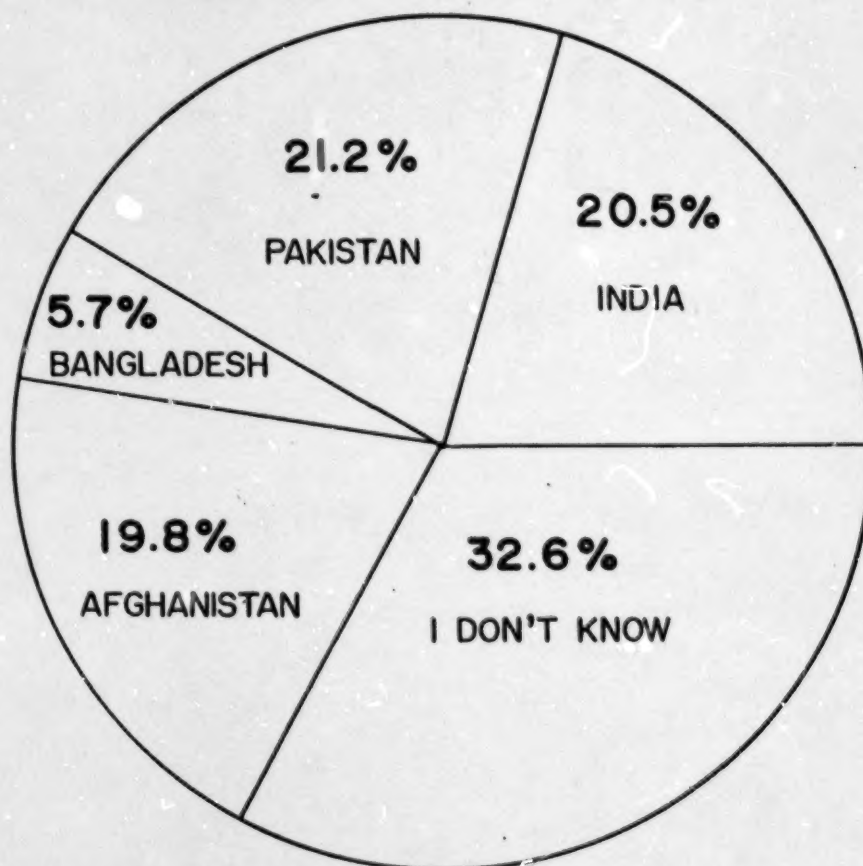
WHICH COUNTRY HAS HAD A CIVILIAN DEMOCRATIC  
FORM OF GOVERNMENT FOR THE LONGEST  
TIME:

## KNOWLEDGE



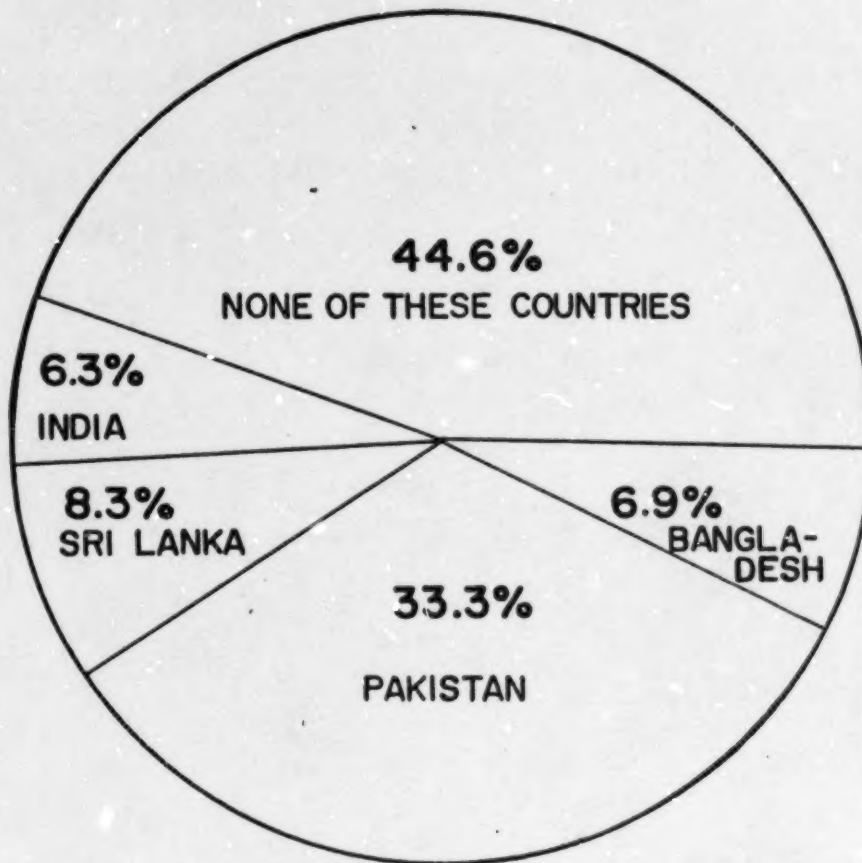
WHICH COUNTRY WAS PART OF  
A FORMER BRITISH COLONY:

## KNOWLEDGE



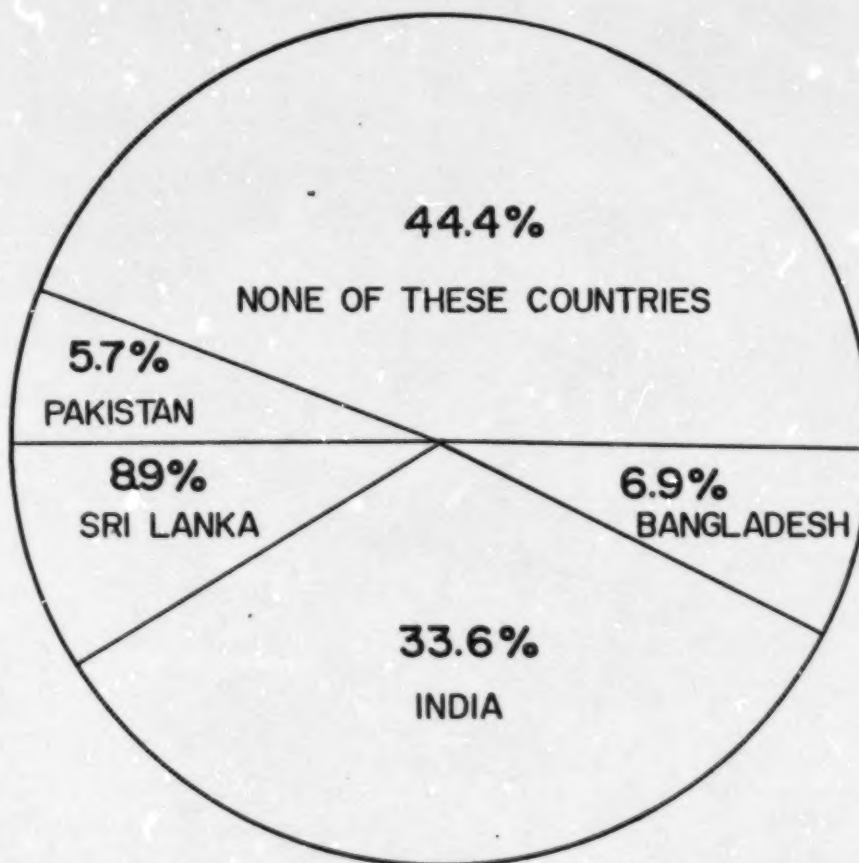
**WHICH COUNTRY HAS THE CLOSEST MILITARY  
CONTACTS WITH THE UNITED STATES:**

## ATTITUDES



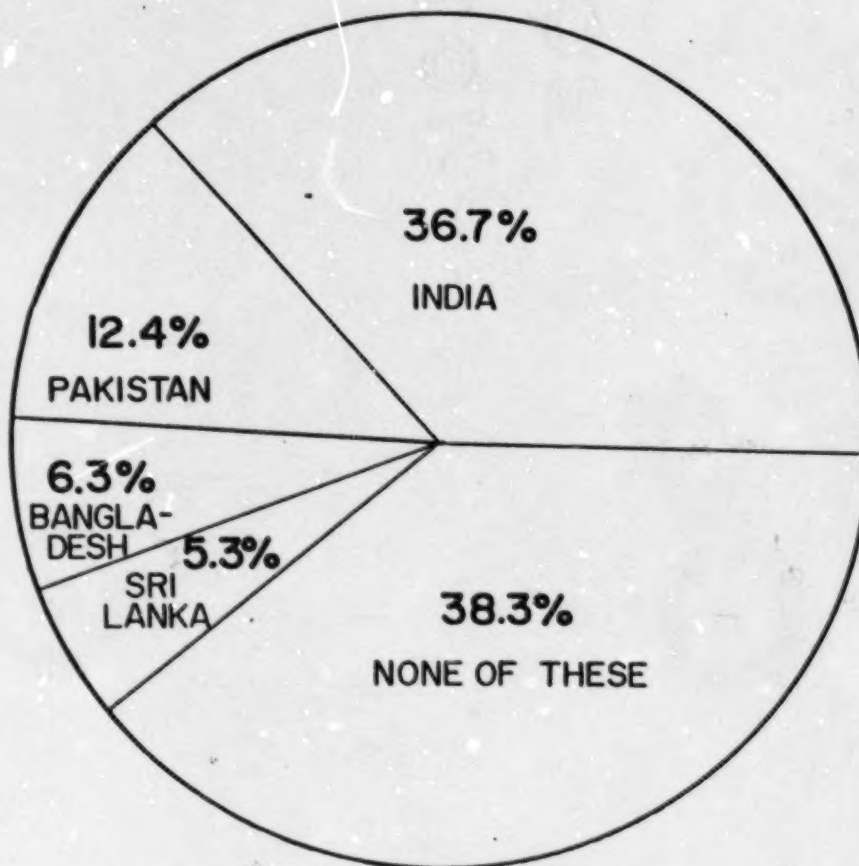
THE COUNTRY THAT I FEEL  
LEAST FAVORABLE TOWARD IS:

## ATTITUDES



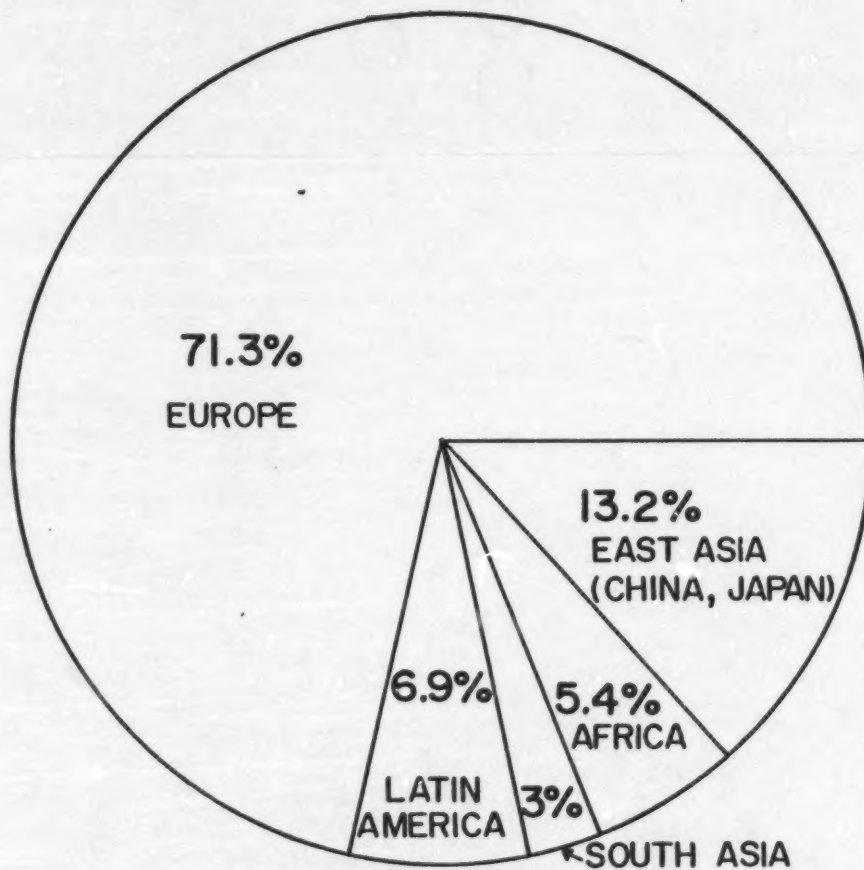
GENERALLY I FEEL MOST FAVORABLE TO:

## ATTITUDES



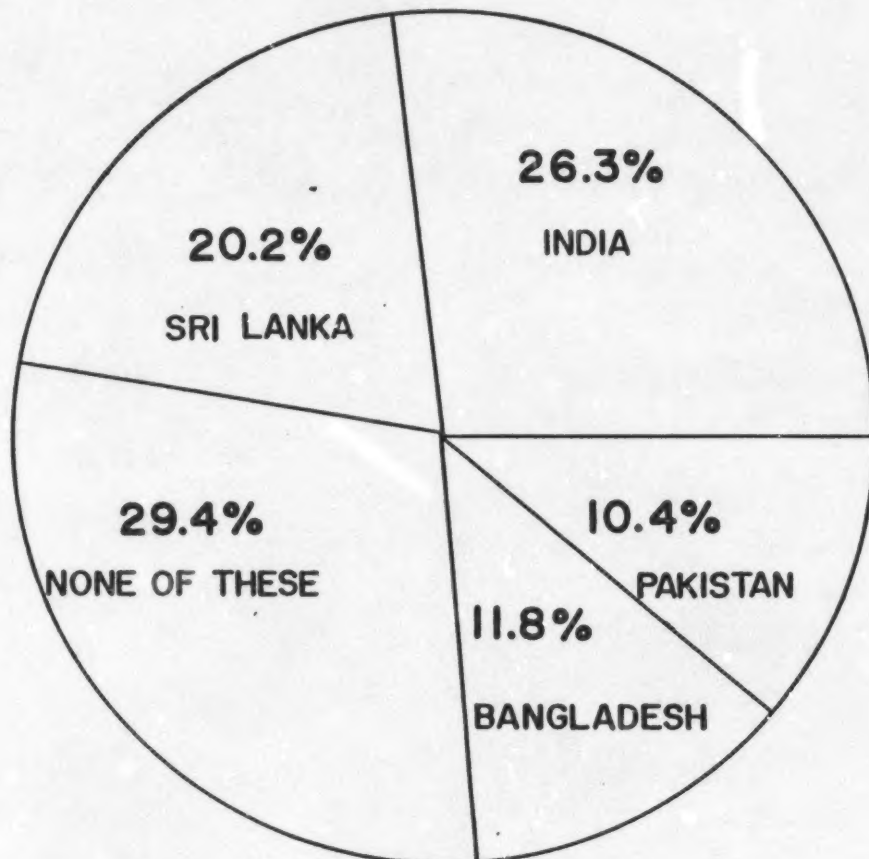
THE COUNTRY THAT I FEEL IS THE STRONGEST  
FRIEND OF THE UNITED STATES IS:

## ATTITUDES



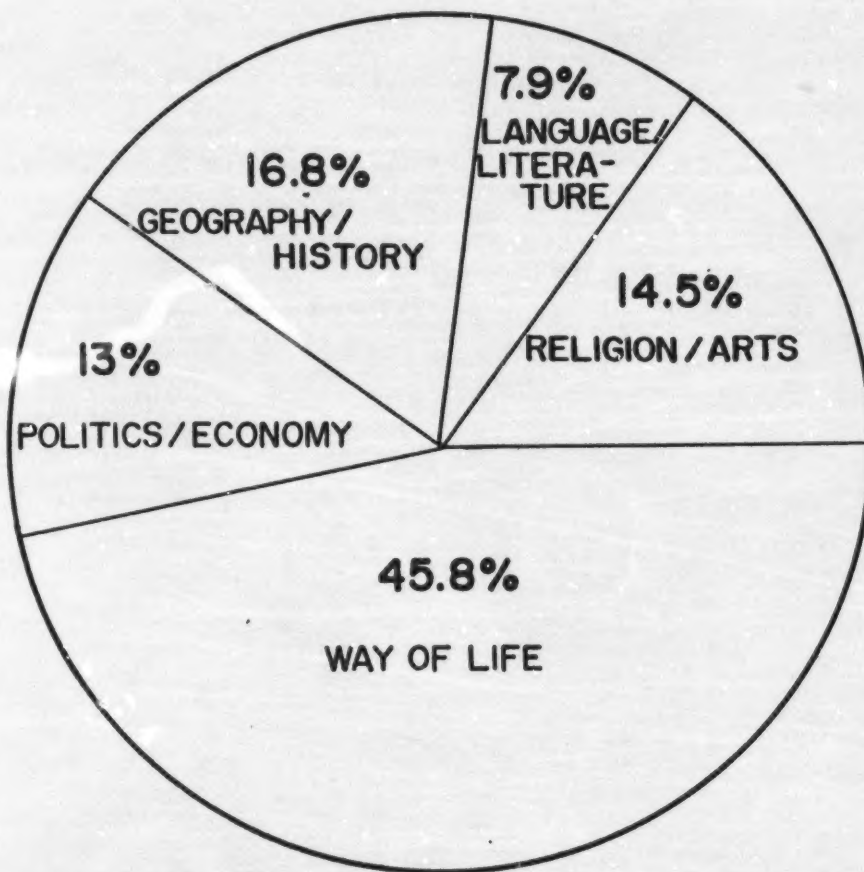
**IF I WERE TO TRAVEL, I  
WOULD FIRST LIKE TO VISIT:**

## INTERESTS



WHICH COUNTRY OF SOUTH ASIA WOULD  
YOU PARTICULARLY LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT:

## INTERESTS



AS A FIRST CHOICE, WHICH ONE OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT IN SOUTH ASIA: